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ABSTRACT

Noting that comic books are known and read by a wide variety of students, this paper presents brief descriptions of 30 ways that teachers can use comic books in a wide variety of subjects and grade levels. The ideas for using comic books in the paper are designed to help teachers become aware of what their students are reading and to use what students already know as a starting point for instruction (and instructions are addressed directly to students). The teaching ideas presented in the paper include: (1) gather and compare a number of historical or literature based comics; (2) examine the political ideas represented in a number of issues of one type of comic; (3) use "strange" comic books to study current and life issues; (4) study a variety of popular comics to find out how the norms and values in these comics parallel societal norms; (5) use comics to analyze literary conventions; (6) study the use of language structures in comic books or cartoons; (7) study the concept of comic book marketing; (8) explore where comic books come from; (9) study comic books that promote particular viewpoints; and (10) create a comic book in which students are the main characters. (RS)

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Using Comic Books To Teach

by Jim Parsons and Kathy Smith

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Introduction

Many people enjoy reading comic books. In fact, comic books are the only thing that some people ever read. When we were young, most of the teachers we had frowned on comic books. Some teachers went so far as to claim that comic books were not literature. Some believed, and stated, that comic books would warp the minds of innocent young "victims" and implied that anyone who read comic books was doomed to a life of problems and woe.

But, there is another side to comic books. They are collected and read by young people and old alike. They are a unique and expressive art form. And, when read carefully, they are instructive. They teach about human dilemma and solve human issues -- despite the fact that they might not even contain humans.

Comic books are a literary form. They express the popular culture of our day and the values and moods of our society. Like all literature, there are good comic books and rotten comic books. Many comic books are to be prized; others are to be shunned.

Below, we have listed some ways that teachers can use comic books in their classrooms. In creating this list, we have done two things. First, we have accepted the fact that comic books are known and read by a wide variety of students. Second, we have stated two beliefs: (1) teachers should become aware of what their students are reading and (2)

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teachers have a responsibility to use what students know -- to start where they are -- to teach. Many of our students, regardless of age, claim that comic books started them on the path to reading and loving literature.

The following list of ideas may be helpful to teachers. Not all the ideas are useful in all situations; but, they can be adapted and used with a wide variety of subjects and grade levels. Note that the directions are written for students.

Ideas for Using Comic Books

1. Gather and study a number of historical or literature based comics. (Some examples are Treasure Island, Moby Dick, and Great Expectations.) Read the longer version of the books or parts of them. Compare the books with the comic books. What are the differences? Are historical events dealt with the same way in both versions? What are the advantages and the disadvantages of each?

2. Pick a number of frames or pictures from the page of a comic book. Study the pictures, and answer the following questions: (1) What kind of feelings do you get from the picture? How did the illustrator create these feelings? (2) What is the mood and the atmosphere? (3) How do you react to the drawings and the actions that you see? (4) How do artists of comic books show action or emotion? Make a list of the techniques you can describe that comic book creators use.

3. (a) Gather a number of issues of one type of comic. (Some examples are Archie, Mad Magazine, G.I. Joe, Sergeant Rock, and martial arts comics.) Consider and discuss the political ideas of the main character or of the author. What does the creator believe about our society or the political system? Is there a dominant political philosophy that pervades

the comic book? If so, what is it? How can you tell? Do you agree with the beliefs of the comic book author? Why or why not?

(b) Collect a number of political cartoons from different newspapers and compare them. Identify the political stance suggested by the cartoonist, and explain how the style reinforces the message being conveyed.

4. Study cartoons that see the world in a different way (like "Farside" and "Bizzaro"). How do you think these cartoonists view the world? What makes them funny? How do these cartoonists see the world differently than most "normal" people? Can you describe and mimic the way that the creators of these cartoons think? How does a little bit of "insanity" shape our view of the world? Try to see the world with a different slant or draw a cartoon that uses the same techniques as these cartoonists.

5. Make a list of the "strangest" comic books you know. Use these "strange" comic books to study current and life issues. For example, what do "Garfield" and "Calvin & Hobbes" say about life and its meaning? How does the "Far Side" portray the actions of people? (Why is it called "Far Side?")

6. Look at a variety of comic strips in the newspaper. (a) Do a short survey to see what comics you and the rest of your class likes the best. Consider what the appeal is of the favourite ones suggested by the survey. Survey a group of adults. Are the same comics the most popular with adults? (b) Study the newspaper comic strips for controversial issues, like the environment, gender stereotypes, or issues of discrimination in language or in action. How closely do these comic books highlight what is going on in the world at the present time?

7. (a) Find examples from the Classic Comic Book series to highlight or personalize events you are discussing in class. (For example, The Last of the Mohicans is a good way to highlight colonial wars.) Discuss the events that are presented in these comic books and those that are left out. Suggest why they think certain events were chosen and not others?
(b) Study these Classic Comic Books for issues of universal concern. What are the basic problems or issues the characters in these books are facing? Compare the human dilemmas in Classic Comic Books to the human dilemmas found in "popular" comic books. List similarities and differences, and suggest reasons for the similarities and difference that you find.

8. Study a variety of popular comics (e.g. "Archie," "For Better or Worse," "Family Circle") to find out how the norms and values in these comics parallel the societal norms of contemporary society. List the characters in each of these comics or cartoons. How do these characters resemble "regular" people you know? Identify their qualities or characteristics. Are these characters stereotyped? How? What are the similarities and differences between the comics and TV cartoons? How closely do these comics or cartoons resemble normal life as you know it?

9. (a) Compare the "super heroes" (men or women) in a variety of comics. Create a chart that compares at least three "super heroes." In your chart, address at least some of these questions: What do they have in common? How are they different? How developed are their personalities? Do they have fatal flaws? If this superhero were a real person, would they be "likable?" Would you want to hang around with the person? Would your parents want you to?
(b) Compare some specific super heroes with people who have lived or who are currently living (these could be political figures, people in the entertainment world, or others). For example, compare Superman with Kevin Costner or Batman with the current Prime

Minister of Canada. Is there a basic difference in what we see as "heroic" in the comics and what we see as heroic (or leadership qualities) in real life? If so, why or why not?

10. (a) Read several segments of "Spy vs. Spy" in Mad Magazine. Compare what happens in this magazine with the East/West relations you read about in the newspaper. Now that the former Soviet Union seems to no longer be a world threat (or a threat to North America) is the humor of Spy vs. Spy diminished? Discuss how real-life politics can effect humour.
(b) Study some issues of Mad Magazine. What political or social comments does Mad Magazine make? By what means are the comments made? Is there a predominant political point of view expressed in the magazine? If so, what is it?

11. Use comics to analyze literary conventions. For example, comic books can be used to study such things as point of view, dialects, symbols, characters that come from a variety of different countries (culture), characters or events from the past and present, and anachronisms.

12 (a) Cut out a variety of cartoons from the newspaper. Remove their captions. Create new captions for the cartoons. Compare your captions to the captions originally placed on the cartoons by the artists. Are you able to guess what the cartoon is about simply by looking at the pictures? Give awards for the best, funniest, and/or strangest captions.
(b) Photocopy pages of a comic book, white out the words, and pick a variety of historical characters to replace the original characters. Add new dialogue to the pictures that shows the historical characters acting in typical or atypical ways.
(c) Use these same cartoons or comic books (without captions) as a way to review the chapter your students are working on. Create captions that exemplify concepts of the chapter being studied. Place these cartoons around the room to be shared with other students.

(d) Interpret visuals in an oral way, by rewriting comic books or cartoons in a dialogue format. Encourage them to create a punctuation or grammatical style that suits the needs of the artist and the characters in the cartoon or comic book story.

13. Collect comic books or comics that can be used for social studies and language arts. For example:

(a) Collect cartoons that will help your students discuss political satire. (These can be used to generate ideas for essays).

(b) Collect cartoons that discuss and analyze political and cultural stereotypes.

(c) Collect cartoons that help students analyze the underlying meaning of stereotypes, prejudices, etc. Study comic books of different eras. Ask a comic book "expert" or collector to come into the classroom. How have comic books changed over the years? (For example, Blondie was once a "simple" housewife. Now she runs a catering business.)

(d) Use comic books to help students identify character development or the characteristics of the antagonistic and protagonist.

(e) Use comic books to analyze comparisons and contrasts of characters, culture, events, etc.

(f) Use comic books as a way to research history. Identify key dates, events, and characters from comics and research the actual occurances in textbooks or encyclopedias.

(g) Use comic books to study sensitive issues. For example, you can study which actions are "better or worse" by examining the comic book interpretation. Simplify and understand issues by creating your own comics.

(h) Use comic books to study how characters make important decisions. Try to "read" the character's thoughts at the point where a decision was made. If another decision were possible, what might the implications of that decision have been? How would life have been different for the characters in the comic book? Why?

14. Study the use of language structures used in comic books or cartoons. For example, (a) study Batman comics as a way to see how onomatopoeia is used ("POW" "SOCK") What effects does the use of language have on the meanings that artists can present? (b) study how can language be used to suggest or show humour.

15. (a) Gather facts and information and create your own cartoons of comic book pages. (Pages from your regular textbooks might be the best source of information for these cartoons or comic book pages.)

(b) Combine math and art as you look at different layout designs in comic books. Study the visuals from left to right and from top to bottom. How do the artists use the space to present the desired effect?

(c) "Play around" with the layout and designs of comic books and create your own layouts. Consider what is taken for granted in the layout design of comics. For example, what do people read first in the comic cells? How does the artist create a smooth read? How does the artist use spacing to direct how the comic book is read? How does the artist direct the reader to keep up with the dialogue between characters?

(d) Create your own cartoons to express their feelings about any topic being discussed. The topics can include personal concerns, political issues, current events, issues concerning society's values and goals, etc. (These can be used to make a collage).

(e) Create a classroom comic book project as a way to study and review a "regular" book you are studying. You can decide on the most important aspects to include as well as how they can best present the concepts clearly.

16. Use comic books to study cults (i.e. Conan). Look at the way these cults spread their belief systems. Look at their hierarchy and structure. Look at the people who lead these

cults. What differences or similarities are there between the comics and what you know of real life?

17. (a) Take a field trip to a comic book store. Interview the people who work there. Ask questions about the kinds of comic books that are being printed. What makes them popular? What are the best sellers? Who buys them? Are there some comic books that are seen as "problems" or controversial?

(b) Use comic books to study censorship. What comics have been banned? Why? What regulations and rules govern what is acceptable or unacceptable? what is moral or immoral? Study the following comics: 'Nam, Team Yankee, Captain America, Sergeant Rock, and/or Captain Planet. Are these acceptable or unacceptable comics? Why or why not?

(c) Set up a debate on the topic: "Comic books should be censored." Consider the viewpoints of your parents as well as your own viewpoints when you are creating your arguments.

18. (a) Study the concept of comic book marketing in the recent "Death of Superman" comic book. How are comic book prices decided? How are comic book "values" set?

(b) Study the price guides for comic books. What are the five most expensive comic books you can find? How are prices set?

(c) List other information that can be found in price guides for comic books. What does this information tell you about comics?

(d) Most good price guides for comic books tell a short plot structure for the stories within the comic books that you might buy. Study these story lines. What are the common themes in comic books? Do these comic books address fundamental human problems? If so, what are these problems?

19. Study comic books as a commodity. If there are comic book auctions in your area, attend an auction. What happens there? Who is buying comic books? How much is paid? Why? Is there a logic to the pricing of comics? Is there a logic to the expressed interest in certain comic books?

20. (a) Study the concepts of patriotism and symbolism in comic books like Captain America. What symbols does the artist or writer use to show patriotism? Where, on a political spectrum, does Captain America lie? Create a political spectrum that can be used to study comic book characters. Using this spectrum, place a variety of comic book characters and cartoonists in their respective placements. Use these placements to discuss political viewpoints.

(b) Use comic books to study environmental issues (i. e. Captain Planet 4R's). Do any comics present an environmental theme?

(c) Use comics to study some of the dominant values of your own society (like the political concepts of law and order). How do comic book writers and artists suggest the needs of society? How do comic books show the ways that law and order breaks down within a society? What do these comics suggest should happen? How valid or accurate are the suggestions about life and politics made in comic books?

(d) Create a comic that uses an actual event showing problems with our laws and/or values. This comic could be based on observation or an item from the TV or newspaper.

(e) Create a comic strip that can be used to demonstrate propaganda. Why does the cartoonist choose to use comic strips to convey messages of propaganda?

21. Explore where comic books come from (e. g. TV shows, feature movies or box office hits, books). Compare the two formats (for example, TV and comics) to see differences or similarities. For example, compare the TV Batman to the movie Batman to the comic

Batman. Other examples include Dick Tracy, Little Orphan Annie, Superman, Superwoman, Spiderman, The Green Hornet (radio), etc.

22. Study the concept of "good vs bad" in comic books. (a) List a variety of heroes from comic books. Then, list a variety of villains. Compare the traits of heroic action versus evil. (b) List a variety of "real-life" personalities and their character traits. How do these same traits compare to the actions of real life characters?

23. Use comic books, specifically in social studies, to study the following concepts:
(a) politics and political situations. List of all the comic books you can find that discuss political problems.
(b) geography. What cities are described in comic books? Can you draw maps of these cities from the descriptions given? What do these comic books suggest about cities?
(c) social studies concepts like regionalism, racial tolerance, and political action. Do comic books suggest strength in diversity or strength in community? Do comic books encourage group or individual action? Compare the handling of racial tolerance, racism, and regionalism in two comic books such as G.I. Joe and Archie. What similarities and differences do you find?

24. Use comic books to explore and promote sciences. For example, what do Star Trek comics say about science and technology? List the technology used to support the stories that is evident in the comic. Consider whether technology is portrayed in a positive or a negative light.

25. Study comic books that promote particular viewpoints. What range of values and perspectives do comic books promote? For example, there are comic books that are explicitly "Christian." How does a Christian comic book, like Barney the Bear, promote

Christianity? Do these comic books show intolerance or bias towards other groups? What makes you think something is intollerant or biased? What other issues are there that comic books address?

26. Consider feminist perspectives as they relate to comic books. For example, are there comic books and cartoons that express a feminist perspective? Consider how "For Better or Worse," "Archie," or "Family Circle" portray females. Create a comic that portrays a visual minority in a positive and productive way.

27. Study comics that are historical or that focus on historical activities. For example, what do comics say about the Vikings of the effect of Romans (Asterix).

28. (a) Use comic books to study culture. For example, study comics that suggest the clash of cultures theme. (Some examples include Blade Runner, Tarzan, Star Trek, or Buck Rogers.) List the two cultures that are in conflict and identify the particular conflicts. What are the characteristics and values of each culture?
(b) Look for cultural biases in existing comic books. Have students list these biases.

29. Create a comic book in which you or your class are the main characters. You might, for example, write a comic going that takes you back to a past major event, like Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure. Be sure to consider aspects of story when you are creating their adventure.

30.Write a "promo" piece for comic books, convincing your parents and teachers of the value of comics. Include examples of the positive aspects of comics. Along with the promotional writing, create a poster that portrays a comic book in a favourable and educationally beneficial light.

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